

Glendale News Press

Bill could help smokers kick the habit

Legislation headed to governor's desk would provide access to tools for cessation.

By Melanie Hicken, melanie.hicken@latimes.com

September 2, 2010

Smokers in Glendale, which has one of the highest smoking rates in Los Angeles County, could gain free access to tools to help them quit smoking under a bill passed by state legislators Tuesday.

County officials and health care representatives gathered on the steps of the Kenneth Hahn Hall of Administration Wednesday morning to call on the governor to sign Senate Bill 220, sponsored by Sen. Leland Yee (D-San Francisco).

If signed into law, the bill would require health insurance companies statewide to provide free access to a range of smoking cessation treatments, including counseling and all federally-approved prescription and over-the-counter medications.

"The passage of SB220 will give so many more smokers the tools they need to be successful," George Ma, president of the Los Angeles County Medical Assn, said at Wednesday's press conference.

Glendale — which instituted citywide secondhand smoke restrictions in 2008 — has previously been a target of countywide smoking cessation programming after a 2007 study found the city had a 15.8% smoking rate.

Local healthcare professionals said the legislation could boost area efforts to help residents kick the habit.

"We've enacted regulations that will restrict sales to youth and give us cleaner air, but because we still have a lot of smokers in the city, they've actually come to the city to ask for help because they don't know where to turn," said Guadulesa Rivera, a community advocate for Glendale Adventist Medical Center who lobbied for the regulations.

Proponents of the legislation, which is modeled after a facet of the federal healthcare reform package that will go into effect in 2014, say it will help prevent disease and healthcare costs associated with smoking.

But a representative for Kaiser Permanente said that the legislation could place a financial burden on healthcare companies, and ultimately their customers.

"When you add additional mandates that you have to cover more things that are typically over-the-counter costs, it hurts the overall affordability of health premiums," said Kathleen McKenna, executive director of public policy advocacy for Kaiser. "So that's one concern."

Kaiser already covers prescription smoking cessation treatments, but requires a co-pay and education component and does not cover over-the-counter treatments, she said.

Camille Levee, chairwoman of the Glendale Healthier Communities Coalition, an organization of local health professionals, said the legislation could still help local smokers.

"I think that would be absolutely fantastic because if more people would stop smoking there would be less of a drain on healthcare resources on trying to correct the effects of those poor life choices," Levee said, although she acknowledged the potential impact on insurance premiums.

"When you put the burden on the insurance companies, then that generally comes back to the people who pay for the premiums," she said. "While I applaud that particular decision, I would also applaud additional steps to not increase the costs to the premiums."